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THE PLAY SCENE IN *HAMLET*

It is one of the oddities of Shakspeare-criticism that, in the mass of exegesis and philosophizing which has grown up about 'Hamlet,' one of the most conspicuous and important scenes in the whole piece should have received comparatively little attention.* The performance of the play within the play before the assembled court is of the highest dramatic significance. Beneath the thinnest disguise of lip-civility, the opposing wills of the villain and the hero meet in a struggle of uncommon tensivity, the consequences of which are of the greatest moment for them both. The scene occupies a place about midway in the third act, a position in which Shakspeare frequently set climactic action. Its importance is enhanced by its pageantry; even on the Elizabethan stage it must have been given with some elaborateness, with rich costumes and courtly ceremonial, with torches carried by the guard, and with the music of drums, trumpets and hautboys. Shakspeare can hardly have failed to consider with some care the dramatic significance of the details of the action, as well as the total effect of the scene and its relation to the rest of the play.

The whole episode is, however, full of difficulties, and the more attentively it is studied the more perplexing these are likely to appear. Discussion has hitherto concerned chiefly the "dozen or sixteen lines" which Hamlet tells the First Player he intends to set down and insert in the play—a distinctly minor question. It is

*Since this study was placed in the hands of the editor of this journal, Mr. J. Dover Wilson has written two articles, to which those who are interested in this general subject may be referred. The first of these, entitled 'The Parallel Plots in Hamlet: a reply to Dr. W. W. Greg,' appeared in the *Modern Language Review*, Vol. XIII, pp. 129-156 (April, 1918). In this the play-scene is briefly discussed. A more extended exposition will be found in the *Athenæum* for July, August and September, 1918, under the title 'The Play-Scene in Hamlet Restored.'

I am in accord with Mr. Wilson as to the unsoundness of Dr. Greg's theories, but to the interpretation of the play-scene set forth in the articles just mentioned I cannot agree. A discussion of this would take more space than is at my disposal here. I have thought it best, therefore, to let my own article stand just as it was written. It will be all the clearer, I hope, because it was put together purely as a piece of exposition, and not with a view to demolishing another hypothesis.

of far greater importance to inquire the dramatic purpose of the dumb-show, the reason why the King and Queen betray no sign of guilt at this representation of the crime, why the King allows the play to continue so long, why the speech of the Poisoner, preceding the King's exit from the hall, seems, in its conventionality, so little likely to have produced his collapse, why the 'Murder of Gonzago,' or the 'Mouse-Trap,' as Hamlet calls it, reproduces so coincidentally the main facts of the murder as revealed by the Ghost, if only a dozen or sixteen lines have been inserted in it, and why the court does not suspect the King of the murder, after the play is over. Such questions as these, and others connected with them, must be settled by those who would be at their ease in their interpretation of the greatest of English tragedies. For the actor and the stage director they are of the highest importance. Moreover, a misunderstanding of these matters may lead to erroneous conceptions of other scenes, and perhaps of the entire play.¹

¹ This may be illustrated, I think, by an elaborate study by Mr. W. W. Greg, 'Hamlet's Hallucination,' in the *Modern Language Review*, Vol. XII, pp. 393-421 (Oct., 1917). In this paper, a new interpretation of the play-scene is made to support the hypothesis that the revelations of the Ghost on the battlements of Elsinore are only a projection of Hamlet's imagination. With this theory, which on other grounds appears absolutely untenable, I am not at present concerned. Nor is my object the refutation of Mr. Greg's explanation of the play-scene, which is as little likely to carry conviction as his views about the Ghost. But his work must be given some prominence, because, by subjecting this scene to a searching scrutiny, it defines certain problems which have been only vaguely realized hitherto. For the benefit of those who desire a condensed statement of his views at this point, I subjoin the following brief outline, with particular reference to the play-scene.

Mr. Greg believes that "the current interpretation of *Hamlet* presupposes an altogether unreasonable want of dramatic capacity in the author," and that "an alternative should be found" (p. 421); that Shakspeare must have written *Hamlet* for the closet as well as for the stage, providing a subtler explanation of the Ghost for the judicious than the objective reality which would be the conception of the general public; and that it is "impossible to regard the narrative of the Ghost as a genuine revelation, but that, on the contrary, it bears internal evidence of being but a figment of Hamlet's brain." He then queries whether Shakspeare did not intend the Ghost to be an hallucination throughout. (p. 419).

But if the King at the play *does* break down upon the talk of the poisoning, says Mr. Greg, how are we to reconcile this with the assumption that the Ghost is but a phantasm of Hamlet's imagination? How could Hamlet have known about the poison if the Ghost did not tell him? Mr. Greg's answer is that the

I

THE EVENTS PRECEDING THE PLAY-SCENE

It is necessary, in the first place, to get a clear idea of the situation up to the presentation of the play before the court in Act III. This situation is, in its larger outlines, familiar to everyone, but certain details must be particularly noted, while events of greater importance in other ways may, for the purposes of the present paper, be omitted.

The opening of the play shows us Hamlet profoundly shocked and bewildered by the sudden death of his father, and by the equally sudden marriage of his mother with his father's brother Claudius. This union was, according to the views of Shakspeare's day, incestuous. Moreover, in disregard of the natural rights of Hamlet to the throne, Claudius has succeeded in getting himself proclaimed king of Denmark.² The ghost of Hamlet's father appears on the

King did *not* murder his brother by pouring poison into his ears, hence he can endure the dumb-show unmoved, and he breaks up the play because he is "convinced—not that his guilt has been discovered, but that Hamlet is a dangerous madman" (p. 406). "The immediate object of the dumb-show is to prove to a critical audience that it is Hamlet's behavior and not the King's that breaks up the court, while at the same time leaving Hamlet himself free to believe in the success of his plot" (p. 420 note).

The dumb-show and the play following are like the revelations attributed to the Ghost, like them even in detail. Hamlet was familiar with this piece "long before he commanded the production of the play at court," and its outlines thus already present in his mind "supplied the details of the Ghost's story" in Act. I (p. 416). "This simple assumption at once removes the difficulty of the coincidence, and explains the one obscure point regarding the Ghost's narrative. Our chain of evidence is complete."

So, to put the matter in a nutshell, there was no Ghost, only an hallucination, and the Ghost's long narrative in Act. I is only Hamlet's conception of the murder, influenced subconsciously by his knowledge of the play of the 'Murder of Gonzago.'—This theory represents the *ne plus ultra* of the tendency, observable in a good deal of modern criticism, to make Shakspeare's ghosts purely subjective. It appears to me superfluous to attempt a refutation here, in view of Professor E. E. Stoll's discussion, "The Objectivity of the Ghosts in Shakspeare," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. XV, (New Series) June, 1907, pp. 201-233. A series of references on the treatment of the supernatural will be found in Schelling's 'Elizabethan Drama,' Vol. II, p. 509.

² Various critics are still puzzled by this matter. Quiller-Couch (*Shakspeare's Workmanship*, N. Y., 1917, p. 151) quotes the King's speech from the throne in Act I, and continues, "what he (Claudius) does not explain, by the way—and what commentators conspire with him and with Shakspeare to over-

castle walls at night, and Hamlet, informed of this, keeps watch and encounters it. The narrative of the ghost of the elder Hamlet, stripped of all its rhetoric, reveals that, while sleeping in his garden, he was murdered by his brother, who poured poison in his ears (the detail is important), that the queen was guilty of illicit relations with Claudius before the murder, and that thus cut off in the blossoms of his sin, without the rites of the Church, the Ghost is forced to dwell in the horrors of Purgatory until the faults of earth have been purged away. While laying upon Hamlet the dreadful duty of vengeance, the Ghost expressly charges that the Queen is to be left to the reproaches of her own conscience.

The effect of these revelations upon Hamlet's delicate and highly nervous organism is overwhelming. He answers Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo, who, alarmed for his safety, seek him out, with "wild and whirling words"—partly through his own intense mental excitement, and partly through an instinctive desire to keep the

look—is the small difficulty that, Hamlet's father deceased, Hamlet should *ipso facto* have inherited the throne." Greg, *loc. cit.*, p. 396, suggests that Claudius reigns by right of some "matriarchal custom, or . . . by that of the strong man on the spot." The true answer seems to be that pointed out long ago by Steevens—that the throne of Denmark was elective, although with a presumption in favor of the heir by descent, and that the King succeeded in securing enough votes for election. Hamlet's remark (Act V, Sc. II, l. 65) that the king had "popp'd in" between the election and his own hopes is the best of testimony to this. It is worth noting that according to Saxo Grammaticus—the ultimate source of the Hamlet-story save vague references—the selection of the Danish kings took place according to this fashion. The theory put forward by C. M. Lewis (*The Genesis of Hamlet*, N.Y., 1907, p. 40) that the situation is best explained by Belleforest does not appear convincing. Belleforest informs us that the characters corresponding to Claudius and the elder Hamlet were governors of a province of Denmark; that Hamlet married the king's daughter, that Claudius slew him and wedded the princess his wife, and that on the death of the king her father Claudius thus became king of Denmark. So, says Lewis, "the elder Hamlet was never king of Denmark, and Claudius reigned only by right of his wife."—But Lewis admits that "in later parts of the novel it seems that Belleforest himself has forgotten the facts, for he speaks as if the elder Hamlet had been king, and Claudius had made himself his heir by the murder" (p. 41). There is scarcely a doubt that this was Shakspeare's—and inferentially Kyd's—understanding of the matter. In Shakspeare's play, the elder Hamlet is repeatedly called "king," the wager with the elder Fortinbras does not look like the act of a prince consort, and there is no intimation that the Queen is of more distinguished birth than her husbands. There is, of course, no evidence that Shakspeare was acquainted with Belleforest.

Ghost's revelations from their knowledge. In order that nothing may interfere with his revenge, Hamlet swears them on his sword-hilt to secrecy. Then an idea strikes him, and he acts upon it suddenly—why not feign madness as a cloak for vengeance? And once more he pledges the others not to betray him, should he think it wise “to put an antic disposition on.”

The scenes at the beginning of Act II show that Hamlet is pursuing this policy. Even before his entrance upon the stage, it appears from the remarks of the king and Polonius that his behavior is giving them the most serious concern. When Hamlet himself appears, he is alternately violent and rational, obviously taking a bitter joy in bewildering the duller wits about him, and sailing as close to the wind as he may without self-betrayal. As yet he has done little or nothing to further his revenge, beyond assuming the mask of madness; and the soliloquy at the end of Act II shows him assailed with doubts of the genuineness of the spectral revelations on the battlements—the Ghost may have been the Devil, assuming his father's likeness to ensnare him to murder, and so gain his soul.

With the introduction of the strolling players, a little earlier than this soliloquy, we have been prepared for a new development in the plot. Hamlet straightway calls for an exhibition of their professional skill, and chooses a speech relating the murder of a king and the grief of his queen. He is obviously very familiar with the art and the repertory of these actors. At the end of the tale of Priam and Hecuba, the actor is himself greatly moved by the pathos of the lines. “Look,” says Polonius, “whether he has not turned his colour and has tears in's eyes. Prithee, no more.” This gives Hamlet the hint of a scheme for testing his uncle's guilt, and again he acts promptly, detaining the First Player as the rest leave the stage, and inquiring if they can play the ‘Murder of Gonzago.’ “You could, for a need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in't, could you not?” The First Player assents, and Hamlet, left alone, breaks out into the soliloquy just referred to—bitter reproaches at his own inactivity. At the end of the soliloquy he collects himself, and once more returns to his plan for producing the ‘Murder of Gonzago.’

I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle; I'll observe his looks;

The Play Scene in "Hamlet"

I'll tent him to the quick; if he but blench
I know my course.

Meanwhile, the king's own mind is far from at ease; at the opening of Act III we are for the first time informed from his own lips of his burden of guilt. His efforts to learn the cause of Hamlet's madness have been unavailing; and he is filled with uneasiness, not knowing what turn this madness may take.

There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger.

So Claudius determines, even before the play-scene, that Hamlet shall be sent to England. His fear of the possible developments of Hamlet's insanity should be constantly borne in mind during the scenes which follow.

How far Hamlet is from being really mad appears in his conversation with Horatio, the one friend at court whom he can trust. He has told Horatio of the revelations of the Ghost, and now informs him of his device to catch the conscience of the king.

There is a play tonight before the king;
One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father's death.

So he urges Horatio to observe the king closely, to see "if his occulted guilt do not itself unkennel in one speech." If the King does not betray himself under this test, then Hamlet's convictions in regard to the murder are morbid and erroneous.³ The "one speech" may conceivably be one self-betraying utterance by Claudius; but, in view of the emphasis which Shakspeare lays on the speech inserted in the play, it seems more likely to be Hamlet's addition to the 'Murder of Gonzago.'

This brings us to the point where closer analysis must begin, and where the main questions of the present investigation must be considered.

³ "and my imaginations are as foul as Vulcan's stithy." Note that "imagination" had not in Shakspeare always its modern significance, and that it sometimes meant a wrong idea or conceit. Cf. Schmidt: 'Shakspeare Lexicon,' Vol. I, p. 571.

II

THE DUMB-SHOW

The scene in which the play is performed before the assembled court is of far greater tensiety than any which have preceded, save the nocturnal revelations of the Ghost upon the battlements. Its effects have been carefully prepared, and it is itself most artfully constructed, so as to increase in interest steadily up to the very moment when the King stops the play. To this climax each stage in the action contributes its due and well-adjusted share. Our present purpose is to examine the dramatic development up to this climax, and to endeavor to gain a clearer understanding of the details, and thereby of the whole scene.

A bit of explanation seems desirable at the outset, in order to make clear the method to be followed here. When we ask the reason why Hamlet delayed the consummation of his revenge upon his uncle, there are really two answers. The first is that without this delay there would be no play. But, in the second place, it is the duty of the dramatist to provide a plausible reason within the play for this postponement of revenge. This Shakspeare does by making Hamlet temperamentally inclined to meditate, to procrastinate, to think too precisely "on the event." Similarly, when we try to explain why the King did not betray himself at the dumb-show, which afforded a lively representation of his guilt, the first reason is that this would have spoiled the whole scene. The climax does not belong at the beginning. But the further question arises: how has Shakspeare made the presentation of the dumb-show and the King's composure plausible? It is this second type of question which will engage our attention here—how Shakspeare has motivated the actions of his characters. Only rarely has he allowed dramatic effectiveness to outweigh the strict logic of a situation, and made his characters act otherwise than in the most natural and obvious way. Close study shows that the motivation of this scene has been very carefully arranged, and that it is consistent with other parts of the play, and with the play as a whole.

The significance of the dumb-show which opens the drama of the strolling players has not hitherto, I believe, been generally realized. Certainly one searches the critics in vain for a satisfactory explanation. To us this pantomime seems rather artificial and perhaps superfluous, on first thought. But it should be remembered

that dumb-shows giving a more or less definite foretaste of the action to come were common enough in Shakspeare's day, so that the use of one here in connection with the testing of the King's guilt would not have seemed so strange to the Globe Theatre audience as it does to us. As has several times been remarked, the dumb-show in 'Hamlet' is of a less usual type, in that it gives, not "an allegorical presentment," but a close representation of the spoken drama to follow. This departure from the usual order of such "shows" is not without significance. In any case, the pantomime must have been put there with a purpose, and we ought to try to divine Shakspeare's intention. I cordially agree with Greg, who has discussed it at some length, that it "was actually designed for its present position, and was intentionally made to anticipate the representation of the spoken play. And no theory of 'Hamlet' is tolerable that does not face this fact and offer a rational explanation of it." But while Greg thinks it was intended to prove to the spectators of 'Hamlet' that Claudius did not murder his brother by pouring poison into his ears, since he could behold a representation of this unmoved,⁴ I believe that the dumb-show was inserted to show the Globe Theater audience (not the Danish court audience) that Claudius knew, before the spoken play, that Hamlet was fully informed of the circumstances of the murder. This increases greatly, as we shall see, the dramatic effectiveness of the scene.

Hautboys play. The Dumb-Show enters.

Enter a King and a Queen, very lovingly: the Queen embracing him, and he her. She kneels, and makes show of protestation unto him. He takes her up, and declines his head upon her neck: lays him down upon a bank of flowers: she, seeing him asleep, leaves him. Anon comes in a fellow, takes off his crown, kisses it, and pours poison in the King's ears, and exit. The Queen returns; finds the King dead, and makes passionate action. The Poisoner, with some two or three Mutes, comes in again, seeming to lament with her. The dead body is carried away. The Poisoner woos the Queen with gifts; she seems loath and unwilling awhile, but in the end accepts his love.

Exeunt.

Why do not the King and Queen take offence at all this? "Is it allowable to direct," as Halliwell, following earlier conjectures, suggested, "that the King and Queen should be whispering confidentially to each other during the dumb-show, and so escape a sight of

⁴See the outline of Greg's theories above, p. 2, note, and his article, esp. p. 401.

it?" I do not think so. To suppose that the King and Queen do not see the pantomime is begging the whole question, in the lack of any evidence of their neglect. There is some plausibility, perhaps, in arguing that they might not pay much attention to a minor part of the performance, inferior in interest to the main entertainment, just as some opera-goers of today talk through the overture. But I do not think this argument sufficient. Why, then, if they witness the pantomime, do they not resent it?

Let us begin with the Queen. It is important to observe, at the outset, that she did not at this time know that her first husband had been murdered by his brother.⁵ That is first revealed to her by Hamlet later on, in the scene in her private apartments. So the marriage of the Player Queen to the murderer of the Player King could have, in Gertrude's mind, no resemblance to her own case. In the second place, it will be observed that the dumb-show gives no indication that the Poisoner was a relative of his victim. That is first brought out during the play proper by Hamlet's comment, "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king." Consequently the Queen could not be affected by the spectacle of a lady marrying within the forbidden limits, for the dumb-show does not reveal this. The only thing that could offend her was the suggestion of the betrothal of a queen, hard upon the death of that queen's first husband. This was not pleasant; but it was a matter in which Gertrude and Claudius had decided to brave public opinion, and there is no adequate reason for the Queen to manifest any open resentment at this point.

The case is different with the King. The moment the dumb-show is over, he realizes that Hamlet knows the whole truth. The action of the dumb-show is too like the crime which he has himself committed to leave doubt upon that score. If there were any such doubt, the drift of Hamlet's apparently mad talk during the spoken

⁵ This point is too familiar to need restatement here. See the Furness 'Variorum Shakespeare,' Vol. II, p. 265. The Ghost ascribes the elder Hamlet's death only to Claudius; Claudius never treats the Queen as guilty with him of the murder; and she never gives any indication of having participated in it. Particularly strong, too, is the evidence of the lines in the First Quarto given to the Queen in the Closet-scene.

But as I haue a soule, I sweare by heauen,
I neuer knew of this most horride murder.

(Variorum, p. 72)

play following would dispel it. And Rosencrantz and Polonius have already mentioned Hamlet's joy at the arrival of the players, his command that they shall give a play, and his desire that the King and Queen shall witness it. Polonius has said; "He beseech'd me to entreat your majesties to hear and see the matter." Claudius would be a dreamy simpleton indeed if he did not realize that the facts of the murder have been discovered. He is far from being a stupid man, and, as the play gives abundant testimony, his apprehensions have reached a high pitch of nervous tension. Moreover, Shakspeare's audience, who, with Hamlet, have listened to the Ghost's revelations, know that the King is aware that Hamlet possesses his dreadful secret. But the Danish court, with the single exception of Horatio, who has been told of the Ghost's narrative, are ignorant of the guilt of Claudius, and there is no reason why the dumb-show should enlighten them, especially as the Poisoner is not shown to be related to the poisoned Player King.

What is Claudius to do? Is he to give the whole black business away by his demeanor? Not a bit of it; he is too clever and too resourceful a villain for that. He is not, as some critics would have us believe, set to go off like a mechanical toy as soon as the events of the murder are represented before him. Any view of Claudius which does not credit him with bravery, adroitness, subtlety, and a determination to play his evil game for all it is worth, and to the bitter end, is surely mistaken. Consider his courage in the scene where Laertes, with the rabble at his heels, utters open defiance; his adroitness in his first address to the court from the throne after his brother's death; the insistence which even the Ghost lays upon the "witchcraft of his wit," and the resolution with which he turns to new crimes in the latter part of the play, to secure his crown, his ambition, and his queen. To betray agitation, to stop the play upon the evidence of the dumb-show, will be to direct suspicion against himself—suspicion of the blackest sort. It will be far wiser for him to await further developments. Dumb-shows were frequently not much like the play they preceded in *action*; it is possible that the king, as Dowden suggests,⁶ takes comfort in the thought that the action of the play to follow will be less disturbing. In any case, his best line of conduct for the present is watchful waiting and dissembling.

⁶ *Tragedy of Hamlet*, 1899, p. 116, note.

There is every reason to suppose that Hamlet knew beforehand that the dumb-show was to form a part of the performance. He was familiar with the 'Murder of Gonzago' long before the players visited Elsinore; he was well acquainted with the plot, the scenes, and the names of the characters—so much so as to be able to act as a kind of Chorus during the performance of the play. And he knew the Italian source. That he should be ignorant of the dumb-show is unthinkable. Moreover, he had especially prepared the play for the evening's performance. Had it interfered with his plans, he would surely have sacrificed it.

Greg thinks that the dumb-show was probably a surprise to Hamlet,⁷ and that it must have interfered with his plans, because "the plot has been prematurely divulged, and the King has shown no symptoms of alarm." But *has* the plot been prematurely divulged? We cannot see into Hamlet's mind, and his remark about "miching mallecho" is too vague to give a hint. We do know that after observing the moving power of words in the player's speech about Hecuba, Hamlet placed his chief reliance upon the speech to be inserted in the play—a fact which he mentions several times. But it is perfectly possible that he considered that the dumb-show would also aid his plot, since this would give two shots at Claudius, the one sudden, the other a more slowly developed emotional attack. As Dowden suggests,⁸ "Hamlet would thus have a double opportunity of catching the conscience of the King." On the other hand, it is evident that the dumb-show, in failing to produce signs of guilt in the King, really hinders Hamlet's main plan, in that it puts the King on his guard, and renders him less likely to "blench" at what was to come. Furthermore, Hamlet's

⁷ His argument at this point is very much a piece of special pleading. "[Hamlet's] comment on the [dumb-]show affords no indication that it [the show] was part of his plan. 'What means this, my lord?' asks Ophelia. 'Marry,' returns Hamlet, 'this is miching mallecho; it means mischief.' The reply is intentionally cryptic; if anything it suggests that the show was a surprise." —Does it? I cannot see the slightest reason for such a conclusion. His remark certainly affords no indication that the show was a part of his plan, but why should it? Why should Hamlet divulge his game to Ophelia, whom he has found he cannot trust, and before the whole court? We cannot, in any case, draw safe conclusions from Hamlet's "mad" speeches. But Greg goes on to argue that "if the dumb-show was unexpected on Hamlet's part, it must have been singularly unwelcome," etc. (*loc. cit.*, p. 404).

⁸ *loc. cit.*, p. 116.

choice of the 'Murder of Gonzago,' so strikingly reproducing the actual circumstances of his father's murder, and apparently fixed up in such a way as to heighten that resemblance, is unwise, since it reveals to the King that Hamlet possesses his guilty secret. A piece in which the victim was murdered by having his throat cut or his brains dashed out would have been almost as good a test of Claudius' guilt, and would have left him uncertain of Hamlet's knowledge. But it would have been less effective dramatically, and less revealing to the audience, than to have the details of the actual murder reproduced. The real question here, then, is not what Hamlet intended, but what Shakspeare intended. In some cases Shakspeare makes his characters act unwisely or even absurdly (just as human beings sometimes do), for the sake of the effectiveness of the drama. For example, there is logically little defence for Lear's casting off Cordelia on so slight a cause, and turning for comfort to Goneril and Regan. His children could not have concealed their real characters from him so many years. But his action is what makes the play. So it is not profitable to argue that Hamlet chose to have the 'Mouse-Trap' resemble the murder of his father so closely because he believed that the effectiveness of this close resemblance in testing the guilt of the king would outweigh the danger in the King's knowing that his secret was discovered; it is not possible to reject the dumb-show as a test on the ground that it was unwise; we must inquire rather why Shakspeare chose to make Hamlet act thus, how it helps the effectiveness of the scene. We may call the presentation of the dumb-show illogical folly, if we choose—though a case may be made out for it, as we have seen—but we must remember that such folly often makes the stuff of tragedy. And it is obvious that the dumb-show, however we may regard it as strategy on Hamlet's part, serves to make the scene dramatically far more intense.

The dumb-show has revealed to the King that Hamlet knows the circumstances of his father's murder. Shakspeare's audience, who have heard the Ghost's communication, now see that the King has discovered Hamlet's knowledge of the crime. The audience also know that Hamlet is going to try to entrap the king by a speech in the play to follow. It is to be a contest of two wills, and the king is on his guard. If the dumb-show were looked upon by Hamlet as a test, it has failed. Will the king "blench" at

Hamlet's main test, or will he keep his countenance, and Hamlet thus be led to conclude that he is innocent, the Ghost a devil, and the revelations on the midnight terrace false? If the audience are made to feel that Claudius has a good chance thus to escape self-betrayal, the dramatic tension is much increased. It is not absolutely necessary that they should feel this, but, like many other subtleties in Shakspeare, this increases the total effect when it is realized. Stories in which things seem to be going against the hero until his final victory are always more exciting than those with a nicer balance of probabilities. The increasing suspense of this scene may be followed in Hamlet's own agitated action and words, culminating in his uncontrollable outburst at the end, when the King finally shows his guilt.

It thus becomes evident why the dumb-show involves a departure from the usual type, in providing a literal rather than a symbolical representation of the action of the play to follow. It is hard enough to keep an audience from being confused by a play within the play which they are witnessing, but if to that were added a symbolical reproduction of the inserted play, confusion would be worse confounded. On the other hand, if the inserted play and the dumb-show are similar in action, and this action is as similar as possible to the events of the murder which it is to expose, no misunderstanding can arise.

One thing must not be overlooked at this point. The Elizabethan audience were not as familiar with the plot of 'Hamlet' as we are today, if indeed most of them knew it at all. The story had been earlier dramatized by Kyd, and some of Shakspeare's auditors may have seen the older play, but Shakspeare can hardly have assumed such acquaintance with the plot. He wrote for people who were seeing an absorbing story developing before their eyes, and who were not sure what turn events would take next. They did not know that they were assisting at the birth of one of the world's greatest tragedies. We must criticize the structure of 'Hamlet,' then, like that of any other stage piece, and not allow modern familiarity with the plot to cloud the issue.

The dramatic action following the dumb-show must now be studied in some detail. But it will be well first to look at the spoken play, or portion of a play, which follows, and consider the nature of the alterations which Hamlet may be supposed to have

made in it—and whether he made any in the dumb-show. This investigation will, I think, provide comfort for those who are disturbed at the close resemblance of the play and the dumb-show to the facts of the murder.

III

THE SPOKEN PLAY

A high literary value cannot be assigned to the 'Murder of Gonzago,' but it appears to be a fair specimen of the drama of the 'Cambises' variety, which must have fallen upon the ears of Shakspeare's audience as stilted and artificial. There is of course a good reason for the employment of this type of drama just here—the same reason as in the First Player's elocutionary effort on Hecuba; Shakspeare "had to distinguish the style of the speech from that of his own dramatic dialogue."⁹ The 'Murder of Gonzago,' while not of a sort unknown to the audience of the Globe Theater, would have seemed old-fashioned on account of its conventionality, its monotonous rhymes, and its rather turgid rhetoric. All this, with the antiquated dumb-show, set sharply against the prose of the speeches of Hamlet, Ophelia, and the King, would have increased its illusion as a *stage* stage-play.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the lines inserted in the play by Hamlet. Did Shakspeare mean that the audience should identify these? I think not: he lays stress on this insertion (in Hamlet's conversation with the First Player, in his instructions to the players, and in his words to Horatio before the play), in order to make the close resemblance between the play and the murder more plausible, and to focus the interest of the audience upon the spoken play. If we must identify the insertion, it seems most likely that it is the speech of Lucianus the Poisoner, beginning "Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing," because of Hamlet's exultant words to Horatio after the play is over, when his test of the King's guilt has fully succeeded.

Ham. O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound.
Didst perceive?

Hor. Very well, my lord.

Ham. Upon the talk of the poisoning?

Hor. I did very well note him.

⁹ Bradley, 'Shakespearean Tragedy,' p. 413.

This fits well with Hamlet's request before the play that Horatio shall narrowly observe the King, and see if "his occulted guilt do not itself unkennel in one speech." But I do not believe that Shakspeare felt it necessary for his audience to identify the inserted speech, since this evidence comes *after* the play. No dramatic purpose would be served by such knowledge, as far as the play-scene itself is concerned. On the other hand, the interest is heightened if the audience is kept wondering which the fatal speech is to be, and watching, like Horatio, who has not been told which speech it is, for the king's self-betrayal.¹⁰

It is not a matter of consequence, and perhaps cannot be determined, whether Hamlet's preparations also involved alteration of the action. Shakspeare twice warns the audience through the mouth of Hamlet that the action of the play is to be strikingly like that of the murder. When Hamlet is elaborating his plan, some little time later than his first avowal of intention to make use of the 'Murder of Gonzago,' and insert a speech, he muses,

I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father.

And still later, in his words to Horatio,

There is a play tonight before the king;
One scene of it *comes near the circumstance*
Which I have told thee of my father's death.

So no strain is imposed upon the credulity of the audience, after all this preparation, to find the *action* of the play—and of the dumb-show—so like the murder. In point of fact, playgoers never *are* disturbed by it. And unless they are gimlet-eyed critics, they will not stop to inquire where the "dozen or sixteen lines" are, or whether Hamlet modified the action, inserting, let us say, the detail

¹⁰ Greg (p. 402, note) thinks it inadmissible to regard the Poisoner's speech as the insertion, "for that speech is clearly an integral part of the play, and does not particularly point at Claudius." I should like to know how Mr. Greg knows that the Poisoner's speech is an integral part of the play. Are we to believe that Hamlet's dozen or sixteen lines would have betrayed themselves by their style? As regards its not pointing particularly at Claudius, I am equally at a loss. It does everything but call him by name. For an explanation of the rather commonplace character of the lines, in contrast to the effect they produce, see below, p. 19.

Bradley, 'Shakespearean Tragedy,' p. 133, has no doubt that the Poisoner's speech is the inserted lines.

of the poison in the ears. They know that he was superintending the performance of the play, writing in a speech, and training the actors; that the play was of his own choice, and that one part of it was to be very like the murder of the elder Hamlet. That is enough, surely, for ordinary dramatic purposes. Shakspeare has, indeed, been somewhat more careful here than is his wont; he frequently asks his audience to swallow very large coincidences for the sake of dramatic effect.

In the present instance, the coincidences are not really so great, perhaps, as they seem. They may be summed up in a sentence: a king with an apparently devoted wife is murdered, while asleep in his garden, by a relative who pours poison in his ears, and wins the love of the queen, pressing his suit with gifts.¹¹ The murderer in the play is the nephew, not the brother of the victim. Stories of a man who makes love to a female relative or betrothed of a man he has killed are not uncommon, either in history or fiction. They are frequent in Elizabethan drama of the revenge type—the 'Spanish Tragedy,' 'Hoffman,' 'Antonio's Revenge.' Shakspeare had already used the motive in 'Richard III.' The most striking correspondence is the pouring of the poison into the ears; and this detail may be imagined, if we choose, to have been inserted at Hamlet's command, in view of what is said of his part in choosing the play, and in giving directions for its proper production, with additions to the dialog. But I do not believe that Shakspeare meant his audience to go so far as this.

Those who are disturbed by the coincidence of Hamlet's finding a play which contained a scene so like that of his father's murder will do well to ponder the resemblances of action in the 'Spanish Tragedy' between the main plot and the play within the play. In the main plot, Horatio is betrothed to Bel-Imperia; Balthazar desires her, and employs Lorenzo to kill Horatio. Balthazar then makes love to Bel-Imperia, who kills him and commits suicide. Supply in this outline Erasto for Horatio, Soliman for Balthazar, the bashaw for Lorenzo, and Perseda for Bel-Imperia, and the plot of the play within the play is stated. Moreover, Hieronimo discloses the action of this inserted play to the murderers who are to take part, Lorenzo and Balthazar, and who are destined to suffer

¹¹ This seems to me to include all the resemblances which seem so striking to Greg.

death through it. There may be influence of the Soliman and Perseda situation, which Kyd seems to have derived from Henry Wotton's 'Courtly Controversy of Cupid's Cautels,' upon the main plot of the 'Spanish Tragedy,'¹² but in criticising the dramatic action we are not at liberty to take this into account. We must look at the story as it presents itself to the audience, not at its literary antecedents. It is equally futile, in discussing the dramatic significance of 'Hamlet,' to point to historical analogs of the poison in the ears, however interesting these may be in themselves.¹³ The historical fact may have influenced Shakspeare—or Kyd in the earlier play—in the conception of the elder Hamlet's death, and at the same time have suggested the name Gonzago, but we must not make the mistake of criticising the dramatic structure on this basis.

The avowed object of Hamlet in staging the 'Mouse-Trap' is to "catch the conscience of the King." But he has a secondary purpose, which reveals itself very clearly as the piece proceeds. He is consumed with a desire to know the extent of his mother's guilt. Was she cognizant of the murder of her husband when she married Claudius? Is she perhaps equally guilty with him? This horrid suspicion is not quieted until the scene in her closet, when Hamlet directly taxes her with the murder.

A bloody deed! almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king, and marry with his brother.

Her response satisfies him that the accusation is groundless, and he never repeats it. But all through the play-scene his mind is tortured with this suspicion, and the Queen's behavior serves on the whole to confirm it. When the Player Queen exclaims,

In second husband let me be accurst!
None wed the second but who kill'd the first—

Gertrude, though in no wise guilty of the murder of the elder Hamlet, as we have seen,¹⁴ cowers before the attack upon women who marry a second time, and Hamlet, watching her narrowly, and probably mistaking her agitation for deeper guilt, mutters "Worm-

¹² See Boas, 'Works of Thomas Kyd,' Oxford, 1901, pp. xxiii; lvi. The view of Boas seems more plausible than that of Sarrazin, that Kyd had written an earlier piece upon the Soliman and Perseda theme.

¹³ See Dowden's note, *loc. cit.*, p. 122: "In 1538, the Duke of Urbano, married to a Gonzaga, was murdered by Luigi Gonzaga, who dropped poison into his ear," etc.

¹⁴ See above, p. 9.

wood! Wormwood!" and finally breaks out into the open challenge "Madam, how like you this play?"—Gertrude, under the eyes of the court, can only gasp, in confusion, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." It thus seems highly probable that the play-scene, which confirmed for Hamlet the truth of the Ghost's accusation of Claudius, led to false conclusions in regard to his mother's guilt.

Meanwhile, the King is watching his chance to save the situation, to stop the play if possible. But to break it off at this point would be dangerous. The Queen is painfully agitated; may not her distress be interpreted as guilt of the accusation in the play that "none wed the second but who kill'd the first?" Such a conclusion must be avoided at all costs. The gibes at women who marry a second time are offensive, but no revelation—all the court knows of the Queen's second marriage. To stop the play on this ground would be to admit that the marriage was offensive, a subject to be handled with gloves, a disgraceful thing. Hamlet's tactless insistence upon it can be forgiven a prince suffering from mental disease, just as his indecorous jests to Ophelia are forgiven. One cannot take offence at the disordered outpourings of a lunatic.

The danger, as the King well knows, is that the play, or Hamlet himself, will reveal the true facts of the murder, in such a way that the court will understand them. But if this does not happen, and he can keep his composure, it will be better for him not to stop the play. He prepares, however, to break the piece off, should it become necessary, by a technicality. Stage-plays performed before royalty should contain nothing irritating to exalted sensibilities. It is to be presumed that this play, given under the direction of the prince, and obviously very familiar to him, will have been thus scrutinized. If, however, in consequence of Hamlet's unsettled mind, or some oversight, this has not been done, the play can be stopped. The King can invoke this solution, then, if worst comes to worst. But a better line of defence is feigned surprise at the whispers that are going about the court. His query to Hamlet, then, "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?" is really intended for the ears of the court, as much as to say, "I see no offence in this play as yet, but I observe that people are exchanging glances; are you sure that there is nothing inadmissible in the lines to come?"

Both the play itself and the comments of Hamlet now take a more incisive turn. First, "your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not," then the revelation that the Poisoner who gains the love of the Queen is a relative of the dead man, then the actual enactment of the poisoning-scene. The King's agitation increases; it is of a twofold nature: fear of betrayal by Hamlet's comments, and the working of his own conscience at seeing his crime reënacted. Hamlet, for his part, reaches a pitch of almost uncontrollable nervous excitement. With a bombastic tag, "Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge," taken at random from old play-material,¹⁵ he hurries on the climax, which may be expected to contain a speech in the grand style. The actual speech of the Poisoner is not very terrifying. But the king, who is not a man without imagination and conscience, as his soliloquy while at prayer proves, is not quite able to control himself. He has steeled himself through the dumb-show, but now, with the whisperings of the court about him, with his knowledge that Hamlet is fully acquainted with his guilt and the details of his crime, and with his suspense lest Hamlet shall betray him, he is not strong enough to endure the emotional strain of the action of the poisoning, reproducing before his eyes an act which is continually causing him the sharpest stings of conscience. It needs no very pointed language to strike him with horror; the revolting action of the crime, coupled with the murderer's damnable faces in the darkened hall, is enough. So, "upon the talk of the poisoning," as Hamlet later tells Horatio, and just at the moment that the murder is committed on the stage, he "blenches," and Hamlet, unable longer to contain himself, leaps up and cries out,

He poisons him i' the garden for's estate. His name's Gonzago; the story is extant, and writ in choice Italian; you shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.

¹⁵ Cf. Dowden, note, p. 123, 'Tragedy of Hamlet,' quoting a communication by Simpson (*Academy*, Dec. 19, 1874) who "shows that Hamlet rolls into one two lines of *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third*." Greg objects that there is nothing in the action of the inserted play at this point which suggests revenge. But Hamlet's words concern the style of the speech, not its matter. His interpolations all through this scene, which are, of course, half made in his rôle of madman, and much affected by his intense excitement, should not be taken too literally.

Upon these last words, as Shakspeare has carefully indicated through Ophelia's exclamation,¹⁶ the King rises. The moment for leaving has come; Hamlet's violence is such that his revelations are not to be risked further, and the ordeal of witnessing the representation of the crime has become unendurable. So, calling for lights, the King rushes from the hall.

It will be noted that while Hamlet's wildness through the play-scene partly leads to the king's self-betrayal, it also saves the king from exposure before the court. For it is perfectly clear that the noble spectators who attended the performance of the 'Murder of Gonzago' were not informed by it of the guilt of Claudius. That was not its intention,¹⁷ and there is no evidence later on that anyone had guessed the truth. The court were looking at the play, and not, like Hamlet and Horatio, scanning the king's visage.¹⁸ On the other hand, Hamlet's interpolated comments must have been heard by everyone, and the interruption of the play was sufficiently explained for the courtiers on this ground. His outburst at the very end was hardly of a sort to be tolerated. Guildenstern tells Hamlet that the King is "marvellous distempered . . . with choler"—exceedingly angry; the Queen has said that Hamlet's actions have bewildered and astonished her, and she confronts her son with the reproach that he has "much offended" Claudius; Polonius reminds her that Hamlet's pranks "have been too broad to bear with," and Claudius finds in the play-scene his final justification for sending Hamlet away.

The terms of our estate may not endure
Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow
Out of his lunacies.

¹⁶ And as Greg has well emphasized. His comments in connection with this scene are often most suggestive; though I believe his interpretation of it, in the broader outlines, to be wholly mistaken.

¹⁷ See Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 96.

¹⁸ The call for lights at the end may mean that the action is to be imagined as taking place in a darkened hall, with the play-stage illuminated. On the general subject of lighting in Elizabethan theatres, see W. J. Lawrence, 'The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies,' Second Series, Philadelphia, 1913, pp. I ff.

IV

CONCLUSION

To summarize briefly the results of the preceding pages is difficult; dramatic analysis calls rather for extended exposition than for condensation. But, in view of the vast amount of Shakspeare criticism which every year brings forth, it may be a convenience for many readers to have the main results of the present essay reduced to their lowest terms and categorically set forth.

In order to understand the play-scene, a careful review of the action preceding is necessary. The dumb-show is inserted with a definite dramatic purpose: to make clear to Shakspeare's audience that Claudius knew before the spoken play that Hamlet had learned the true facts of the murder. This puts the King on his guard and lessens the likelihood of his betraying himself, thus heightening the dramatic tension during the performance of the spoken play by making it seem likely that Hamlet's plot may fail after all. There is every reason to conclude that Hamlet knew that the dumb-show was to be performed; but if it was intended as a test of the King's guilt, it was a failure, and came near to wrecking Hamlet's plans. The dumb-show is of a less usual type in that it offers a literal rather than a symbolical representation of the action to follow in the spoken play. Shakspeare (or Kyd in the earlier 'Hamlet') made this arrangement in the interest of clearness and vividness; to have a symbolical pantomime of the play within the main play would have been too confusing. It is not admissible to suppose that Claudius and Gertrude did not pay attention to the dumb-show, and analysis of the situation shows why neither of them manifested discomposure upon witnessing it. The 'Murder of Gonzago' is intentionally archaic and artificial in type, because it was necessary to convey the illusion of a stage-play presented before the actors in the main stage-play. Shakspeare informs us that it was especially prepared by Hamlet for the occasion; Hamlet has commanded the performance of this particular piece, trained the actors, and urged the King and Queen to be present; twice Hamlet says that the action will be strikingly like that of the murder, and several times he alludes to a speech which is to be from his pen and inserted in the play. This removes the reproach of too great coincidence between the events of the murder and the 'Mouse-Trap,' and serves to concentrate attention upon the spoken play. The exact identi-

fication of the "dozen or sixteen lines" inserted in the 'Murder of Gonzago' is impossible, and it does not appear that Shakspeare meant the audience to identify them. If the attempt must be made, the probabilities are in favor of the speech of Lucianus the Poisoner. The play is a test of the Queen's guilt as well as of the King's; Hamlet probably gathers false conclusions from her demeanor. The King does not stop the play, because to do so would be a tacit confession of guilt. His agitation lest the words of Hamlet, who is now in possession of his secret, or the words of the play itself, should reveal to the court the true facts of the murder, together with his horror at seeing his crime literally reenacted, cause him to "blench," whereupon Hamlet breaks in with words and action so violent that the King has adequate excuse for stopping the play and leaving the hall. The court does not suspect the guilt of Claudius, for they have not been occupied, like Hamlet and Horatio, in watching his face, but they have all heard the wild outbursts of Hamlet, which are accepted as sufficient reason for stopping the performance. The King's determination to get rid of Hamlet thus gains added justification; it appears hazardous to allow him to remain longer at the court.

The analysis offered in the preceding pages is entirely in keeping with what may be called the traditional view of the play, as expressed by the best critics of the present day. The lover of 'Hamlet' is not asked to accept a new and startling hypothesis which will totally change the significance of the piece; he is invited rather to consider Shakspeare's art in the management of detail. Surely the main lines of the action are simple and definite, and have been accepted as such by generations of playgoers. Shakspeare did not obscure the story so that it has been misunderstood for three hundred years. There is every indication, however, that he labored over 'Hamlet' more than was his wont, spending loving care on the nice adjustment of the smaller issues. We have endeavored to perceive his purpose in some of these subtler questions. Such minute study, surely, should not have the effect of blunting the poignancy of the tragedy or of diminishing its imaginative appeal. On the contrary, it should leave us with a new admiration for Shakspeare's technical accomplishment, and a more sane and discriminating enjoyment of his greatest masterpiece.

WILLIAM WITHERLE LAWRENCE

Columbia University.